Rewarding the Team

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Dancers enjoy doing a square dance routine correctly both as an individual and as part of a "team" of eight dancers. There is "individual success," and there is "team success". The individual dancer can judge his/her own success. Did he/she get from point A to point B correctly? Did he/she have to cheat or cut a corner to get there?

Knowing when the dance routine is finished, and the "team" has succeeded is sometimes tricky in today's modern western square dance environment. Callers often do not provide any signals to the dancers that tell them they have succeeded in executing part of a patter tip correctly.

So, dancers look for "success" of the "team" at three points: 1) When they hear the words "Swing" or "Left Allemande," and the expected person is there. 2) When they are told, "You're Home," and everyone has their original partner and is at home, 3) When they hear, "Promenade," and they have their original partner to Promenade.

At any of these points, most dancers look around to see how well the other dancers in the set did. Did all of them dance each "basic" correctly? Do they have their original partner? Did "the team" succeed? They don't know until everyone is back at their home position. Then they can finally cheer.

How frequently should the caller reward the "team" for their efforts? In my opinion, the dancers need to be rewarded many times during the patter portion of the tip. This relates to how long should a caller continue a dance routine before resolving the set and returning the dancers to home position. (Static Square)

First, as the caller, you may recognize that the set is resolved at several points in a dance routine, but the dancers will not realize that the set is resolved. One of the most common examples of this is to Setup a Corner Box or a Partner Line. The set is resolved, but the dancer usually does not recognize that the set is resolved. From the caller's viewpoint, the fun is just starting.

From a Corner Box or Partner Line, the caller has many options. Here are just a few. The caller can insert a Facing Couple Zero. The caller could move the active dancers across the street. The set could be Inverted and Rotated, or flip-flopped, etc. Then the caller could choose to Getout to a Left Allemande or Right & Left Grand or You're Home, etc. The choice depends on the caller, their plan, and how well the dancers are succeeding.

The temptation, for many callers, is to stick in several Zeros of some kind. Some callers will use a combination of all of the above. Some dancers will enjoy this approach. Many dancers will get frustrated with the length of the dance routine.

While the caller is calling, the dancers are wondering whether the whole set is dancing what is being called. If people continue to move around, they surmise it's going OK, but they don't know if everyone in the set is doing OK.

The average square dance "Basic" takes 4-5 steps to complete. If the caller is calling smoothly, that takes about 2.5 seconds. If the caller is a stop-n-go caller, it can take much longer. If the caller is explaining to one or two couples what they don't understand, it can take even more time.

So! How long should the caller make dancers wait for their "reward"? At an average length of five steps for each "basic", a competent caller can comfortably call 20-24 "basics" per minute of music. If the caller is a

stop-n-go caller, and many are, it's much fewer "basics" per minute. For dancers, a minute is a long time to dance without any assurance that the "team" is succeeding.

Here is an example patter square routine that is used by callers all over the world. The example is timed for a smooth caller. Double the time if you are a stop-n-go caller.

SS-CB
SqT = 10 steps = 5 seconds

CB-CB (Chicken Plucker Module)
RLT(6) … Pass to the Center(2) … Centers PT(2) … RLT(6) … Pass to the Center(2) … Centers PT(2) … Total Steps = 20 Secs = 10

CB-SS
StrT(4) … SqT 3/4(8) … AL(6) … Sw at Home(4-8) Total Steps = 22–24 Sec = 11-12 seconds

The total dance routine, as written, will take 26-27 seconds to get back to a Static Square. The total length of the dance routine is 11 "Basics."

Now, what happens if the caller chooses to add in a Facing Couple Zero (FCZ) after the SqT and another FCZ across the street. Assume that each FCZ is a string of five basics, and each basic takes an average of 5 steps. That's an average of 25 steps or 12.5 seconds for each FCZ. That adds 25 seconds to the routine. The extended dance routine, is now most of a minute (50+ sec), before the dancers are rewarded with the knowledge that they didn't mess up.

There is something else to consider. Who gets to lead the parade? Most of the dancing done in the U.S. today is danced from the Chicken Plucker Frame. Most of that time is danced with Head or Side Couples being the "active" couples, and the other couples stay at their home position. I've seen callers glue the inactive couples at their home position for as long as two minutes while they ran the active couples back forth across the grid. That's boring for the inactive couples.

The caller should balance the combined length of the Setup, the Zeros, and the Get-out so that all three components work together to form a whole dance routine of a reasonable length. That takes planning. Keep in mind that the longer the interval between rewards, the higher the stress on the dancers.

My choice has always been to keep the Modules short and limit the number of Modules I use before I resolve to a Static Square. I know how long each "basic" takes to dance. I strive to give them rewards at intervals of no longer than 45 seconds to 1 minute. If I observe that multiple sets are breaking down, I cut down on the length of the total routine. This is done by simplifying usually the Setup and/or the Getout. I also use shorter Zero Modules.

I try to call smoothly. I've found that if I expect people to keep up, they will keep up. And they are happier dancing easy material smoothly than dancing harder material where I have to wait for some dancers to figure out what to do.

There is a quick way for you to judge your performance. Have someone keep track of how long you call a patter tip and then count the number of times you return the dancers to home position. If the frequency of the rewards intervals is longer than one minute, you probably should take a look at why.